My SAlty Summer

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It began in a similar way to how it probably begins for everyone. My friend Brian* and I were attending a dance rally against the tampon tax at Martin Place on August 14 when we were approached by Sarah Garnham, Socialist Alternative's National Students Coordinator. Brian* and I stood alone on the crowd's periphery, an awkward island unaccustomed to protest, naively ditching school to be there.

It may have been our isolation that piqued her interest, our novelty in a parochial scene. Our subsequent conversation, which lasted the duration of a now subordinated rally, indicated that we were obvious targets.

Flattered and eager to please, I replied to her torrent of questions with some Marxist thought derived from an HSC English course.

"*How'd you hear about this?"*

"*Do you consider yourself anti-Capitalist?"*

"*Where do you / did you go to school?"*

As Brian and I ambled back to the North Shore line, my private school sports bag brimming with a litany of leftist literature, I was met with a series of concerned text messages from older friends who'd observed the proceedings. They swiftly and definitively discouraged further contact. Lucy*, in particular, passed on her experiences of Socialist Alternative at USyd, saying they were sectarian and a blight on the left.

Yet in the face of a post-HSC purposelessness, a budding interest in leftist politics slowly ripened.

Brian and I took to Martin Place again on November 25 in order to support an anti-Reclaim Australia counter rally. As Lucy rightly predicted, a familiar face greeted us. Sarah, immediately recognising us, brought us over to their stall, isolating me in an attempt to sell the first of many books as fellow 'rades insisted on our attendance at a post-rally meeting.

When *Honi* asked Socialist Alternative if Sarah recruited me, they said, "No she did not recruit Liam." Unfortunately our many exchanged messages tell a different story.

Things moved quickly from there. Within a week I'd completed a number of Marxist Discussion Groups (MDGs), finished reading their "Introduction to Marxism" book, and shared in post-meeting merriment with my new friends. I was always greeted with a warm smile, always welcomed into discussions if I looked out of place. I was made to feel wanted, even appreciated, as I moved deeper into the organisation and its quasi-familial nexus.

This nexus was not the only source of wisdom, however. Lucy met my daily recounts with an intrigue and concern. She helped maintain an existing scepticism and curiosity that belied my image as a faithful recruit. Her constant surprise at every revelation made clear how opaque the organisation is. Fortunately for me, Lucy was the constant source of perspective that other recruits might not ordinarily have. She made clear that Socialist Alternative were not the only option for an anti-capitalist, a reassurance that lingered in the back of my mind.

The road to membership

My goal was to understand the organisation and I performed whatever version of myself was necessary for their approval.

This performance soon led to work on stalls. Socialist Alternative has a clear modus operandi – to establish within the first minute of conversation whether you are a potential member, or "contact", with a view to recruiting as many members as possible.

Alongside phone, email, and Facebook details, I would evaluate each prospective member, sharing conversation details in a post-stall caucus while devising a tailored recruitment strategy characterised by constant contact, surveillance, and conditioning.

Unique to Socialist Alternative, the transition from "contact" to "member" is arduous, requiring satisfactory achievement in the aforementioned MDGs. I was certain from the outset these "courses" had a more insidious purpose, as they provide an opportunity for the organisation to vet members, eliminating views inconsistent with the organisation's, while inculcating doctrine.

Socialist Alternative told *Honi,* "We offer Marxism discussion groups to people who are new to Marxist politics and interested in learning about it." My experience was different.

The MDGs involve contacts being run through common arguments and told what the "right" refutation is, the analysis of specific historical events with a pre-set interpretation, and a diagnosis of the current political climate, complete with disparaging descriptions of rival organisations.

It's perhaps the reason members of Socialist Alternative echo each other with such precision. During the day of that fateful Reclaim Australia rally, six different people told me "50 per cent of the people who voted for the Golden Dawn party were police officers".

And yet it was the concurrence of a trip to visit family in Victoria and the National Union of Students' National Conference ("NatCon") that taught me the most.

Prioritising the organisation over family and other interests had, by now, become the

norm. Leaving my grandfather on his farm in Gippsland, having been given a makeshift conference pass, I attended two days of NatCon. When asked, Socialist Alternative told *Honi* I came along for "a couple of hours on one of the days".

Though I was pursuing the organisation out of interest and free will, I still had limited capacity to rebuff their offers. When pressed about my attendance at an upcoming "Marxism Conference" for example, my response – that I would probably be occupied with family Easter celebrations – was met with the unsympathetic retort that "[I could] do family things every year".

NUS National Conference

At NatCon I observed Socialist Alternative's interactions with other political factions for the first time. It was the aggressive, fanatical, and dishonest side to the organisation I had been warned of from day one.

Perhaps unlike the average member though, I followed the conference on the *Honi Soit* live blog, which demonstrated how purposefully constructed the reality of a Socialist Alternative member could be. Lucy was also at the conference, so although we resolved to ignore each other, we'd meet up and chat away from the conference.

As Socialist Alternative prepped their ethno-cultural and educational policy stances, I was given a customary rundown on rival political factions. There was a pre-existing spiel for them all and, like the Golden Dawn example, it was repeated in various iterations throughout my tenure. In the heat of factional tension, it went something like this:

Labor Unity (Labor Right): right wing, careerist fuckwits who uncritically conform to, and advance, Labor party policy.

National Labor Students (Labor Left): perhaps worse than Labor Unity in that they redirect leftist rhetoric and momentum towards the advancement of the Labor party. Especially pernicious is their use of identity politics to advance right wing interests.

Grassroots, aka the Swamp: opportunists who betray the left through 'class collaboration' (i.e. lobbying university management directly) and who aren't real activists anyway.

The Liberals: fuckwits who shouldn't be allowed to attend NUS.

The Independents: inconsistent and fascist.

Socialist Alliance / Solidarity: crumbling, yet bitter, rivals who only exist to get in our way and make life difficult for us. Maybe one day, when they become more ideologically pure, we'll merge with them.

Anarchists: people with drug problems and whose beliefs led to the Franco regime.

Despite their scathing review of all other factions, the *Honi* live blog elucidated something they would not: they were willing to compromise on their values to work with all those groups, just as swiftly as they were prepared to dispose of them.

It was with no trace of remorse that Socialist Alternative members readily, and hypocritically, made deals with Unity to rename the "Queer" department to the "LGBT" department, without my or, I assume, other lower ranking members knowledge. It was with no hesitancy that Socialist Alternative compromised their political opposition to affirmative action and backroom dealings to lock Grassroots, the group they have the most in common with ideologically, out of all office bearer positions. It was with no tinge of guilt that they mocked Grassroots members, including deserving candidates for various positions, while a senior Sydney member privately praised the "stroke of bureaucratic genius" that enabled it.

Following a series of deceptive manoeuvres that saw them secure two Queer Officer positions, the aforementioned senior member posted an out-dated and incorrect screenshot of the *Honi* blog with the caption: "glad we could lock Dylan [Lloyd, UNSW Grassroots member] out…who dealt with the Liberals to get his spot".

Like high school mean girls, members descended in the comments celebrating that Dylan and others had cried. Without external sources to tell a different story, I too would have joined the chorus of celebration.

Life as a disillusioned footsoldier

In spite of increasing, yet still private, disillusionment, I left Melbourne with a membership card. It was at this point I was informed of "dues" I would have to pay in proportion to my income. This was justified to *Honi* as "like any union or political party."

It was insinuated that, because of my private education, I should nominate for a higher amount. On top of this I was also expected to pay for an annual subscription to *Red Flag* – a newspaper established and run by members of Socialist Alternative. Badges, t-shirts, tote bags and other kinds of merchandise were also available for the trendier Bolshy looking to accessorise.

For an anti-capitalist group, I thought, they certainly have a great business model. I still have no idea where the money went, nor do I know how it was distributed.

Interestingly, however, I heard rumours, fitting with my experience of a highly stratified organisation, that some members were afforded a stipend of sorts from the organisation. Socialist Alternative denied this to *Honi.*

I was never party to any kind of meaningful policy debate or to any discussion around upcoming actions, be it online or in person. Each meeting, each news item that cropped up, each planned event, would be described, having already been decided in advance.

Of course, there were opportunities to express opinions but that process was severely limited. Such opportunities followed, and were a reaction to, the presentation of an existing choice.

"*The existing leadership slate has nominated the following five people to take over for 2016… what do you think?"*

Choices, if they were presented, were narrow in nature. In essence, the leadership would provide a finite number of options, with one to be selected.

"*Should we put posters up tomorrow or on Tuesday?"*

Yet the largest constraint was the subtlest one, as members are sorted into, then groomed for, one of three roles. My independent assessment of the organisation is that most become what I've referred to as "footsoldiers", occasionally getting minor, bureaucratic roles on a rotational basis, but mainly performing tasks like stalls, poster runs, etc. Some particularly intelligent members become the "intelligentsia", theory buffs that help construct and maintain the organisation's doctrine. Finally there are the leaders, members who, it is hoped, will ascend up the hierarchy.

Further rankings exist within that final group. One older member in Melbourne, from memory, disclosed that Omar Hassan, a senior figure of the Sydney branch, was "ranked third" when they initially sorted him into the leadership box on account of his "hippie" qualities and proclivity to random international trips. Omar had "exceeded all expectations" by getting as far as he had, apparently.

Planning my escape route

Following a comparatively dormant period, I resolved to leave the organisation. I had been working on stalls regularly. My curiosity had been satisfied, the commitment had become tiresome and recruiting others was starting to feel morally dubious.

Though their constitution spells out quite clearly that "members may resign at any time by communicating their resignation to any body of the organisation" I had heard different stories. I'd read student publications describing harassment. I'd spoken to friends, some old and some new, who relayed personal experiences of vitriol, spitting, and physical intimidation. I'd been told of an ex-member receiving unstamped death threats in their mailbox. Reassuringly, they denied this to *Honi.*

It took a while before I mustered the courage to write, crosscheck with Lucy, and then

send, my carefully constructed message of resignation. Playing on their perceptions of my merciless bourgeois family, I wove a tale of familial discord epitomised by the looming threat of expulsion from my home.

Given our history I chose Sarah to be the recipient of my message. Her disappointment was tinged with the hope that I would re-join. Despite that, messages and phone calls accompanied continual event invitations and Facebook tags. Either Sarah withheld my resign
ation or the organisation had ignored my request.

Omar, in keeping with the latter suspicion, would later send me what I perceived to be a confrontational message suggesting that I "owe it to them" to meet up "face to face".

It was not all bad cop, however, as a young female member, with whom I was hardly acquainted, randomly asked me on a date. Overwhelming insecurity, perhaps, led me to speculate that it was another, albeit humorous, ploy to reel me back.

Reflections, concessions and apologies

There are members of Socialist Alternative who have given their lives to activism. There are others who are on a similar trajectory. It is impossible not to admire that kind of dedication. I see in many of them a genuine and well-intentioned desire to improve the world.

But the uncomfortable truth is that this drive is the result of deliberate and organised conditioning. This energy is maintained through subtle and overt manipulation. This agitation is symptomatic of, and perpetuated by, a system that makes the simple act of resigning one to fear.

My biggest regret is my complicity in the recruitment of curious, enthusiastic youngsters. To them I offer an unreserved apology and an invitation to ignore my hollow words.

To them, and those who are considering or in the process of joining, I urge you to tread carefully and think critically. Your enthusiasm and vigour, much like that of current members, won't be channelled into the improvement of the world. Rather, it will be funnelled into the improvement of their world, one that is defined and controlled by those at the top.

It seems, therefore, that Orwell's famous aphorism echoes through generations of struggle to describe my salty summer perfectly:

Some animals are more equal than others.